

Moral Rationalism Vs. Moral Sentimentalism: Is Morality More Like Math or Beauty?

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Abstract

One of the most significant disputes in early modern philosophy was between the moral rationalists and the moral sentimentalists. The moral rationalists — such as Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Clarke and John Balguy — held that morality originated in reason alone. The moral sentimentalists — such as Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson and David Hume — held that morality originated at least partly in sentiment. In addition to arguments, the rationalists and sentimentalists developed rich analogies. The most significant analogy the rationalists developed was between morality and mathematics. The most significant analogy the sentimentalists developed was between morality and beauty. These two analogies illustrate well the main ideas, underlying insights, and accounts of moral phenomenology the two positions have to offer. An examination of the two analogies will thus serve as a useful introduction to the debate between moral rationalism and moral sentimentalism as a whole.

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1. Introduction

One of the most significant disputes in early modern philosophy was between the moral rationalists and the moral sentimentalists. The moral rationalists — such as Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) and John Balguy (1688-1748) — held that morality originated in reason alone.¹ The moral sentimentalists — such as the

third Earl of Shaftesbury² (1671-1713), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) and David Hume (1711-1776) — held that morality originated at least partly in sentiment.³

Both sides of the rationalist-sentimentalist debate marshaled a battery of arguments for their positions. The rationalists argued, for instance, that moral standards are absolute and universal but that sentiments are too relative to ground such standards; the rationalists also argued that because one cannot control the sentiments one experiences, sentimentalist theories cannot account for the praise we bestow on virtue and the blame we level at vice. The sentimentalists argued that morals have a motivational force that reason alone cannot produce; the sentimentalists also argued that our moral distinctions are more robust than the purely formal distinctions that reason on its own can draw.⁴

In addition to those arguments — and often in service of them — the rationalists and sentimentalists developed rich analogies. The most significant analogy the rationalists developed was between morality and mathematics. The most significant analogy the sentimentalists developed was between morality and beauty. These two analogies illustrate well many of the main ideas and underlying insights of the two positions. An examination of the two analogies will thus serve as a useful introduction to the debate between moral rationalism and moral sentimentalism as a whole.

In section 2, I describe the rationalists' mathematics-morality analogy. In section 3, I describe the sentimentalists' beauty-morality analogy. And in section 4, I discuss how we might adjudicate between the two analogies and situate the early modern rationalist and sentimentalist ideas in certain contemporary moral debates.

2. The rationalists' mathematics-morality analogy

It is self-evident that two plus two equals four. Also self-evident is that it is wrong to kill an innocent person without any reason or provocation at all. The self-evidence of these two propositions lies at the base of the rationalists' mathematics-morality analogy.⁵

Descartes had raised the worry that we could be wrong about even those things that seem self-evident to us.⁶ But the rationalists denied that this kind of Cartesian skepticism was coherent. They held that our certainty about mathematics was self-verifying — that its being self-evident to us that two plus two equals four was sufficient for establishing that it was true that two plus two equals four.⁷ But we are just as certain that it is wrong to kill an innocent person as we are that two plus two equals four. There can be no doubt, therefore, that it really is wrong to kill an innocent person. The moral belief has the same impeccable epistemic bona fides as the arithmetical belief.

The rationalists maintained that another way in which our belief that it is wrong to kill an innocent person is the same as our belief that two plus two equals four is that we arrive at both through the use of a priori reason alone. It is not experience that teaches us that two plus two equals four or that killing an innocent person is wrong. Both of these propositions are such that we cannot but affirm them as soon as we understand the relevant terms. Both propositions “force the Assent of all Men” regardless of the experiences we have or have not had (Clarke 615).⁸

From the fact that we cannot but assent to certain mathematical and moral propositions — from the fact that it is impossible to understand the propositions and yet deny their truth — the rationalists thought it followed that both propositions were not just true but *necessarily* true. Two plus two *had* to equal four. It could not have been

otherwise. And killing an innocent person *had* to be wrong. According to the rationalists, moral truths, like those of mathematics, held on every possible world.

This modal claim — that moral propositions are not just true but *necessarily* true — was of great importance to one of the rationalists’ principal philosophical goals, which was to refute the view that morality originated in the arbitrary will of a powerful being. There were two types of this will-based view that the rationalists sought to refute: the voluntarist type (also sometimes called “Divine Command Theory”) and the Hobbesian type. The voluntarists held that morality originated in the will of God, that God created good and evil, just as He created every other thing in the universe, and that if God had chosen to make it right to kill an innocent person then such killing would be right. The Hobbesian view, at least as the rationalists construed it, implied that sovereigns or political leaders had the power to make things right or wrong, so that if the sovereign ordered you to kill an innocent person then killing the innocent person would be right.⁹ That is not to say that voluntarist and Hobbesian views implied that it was actually right to kill an innocent person. Voluntarists and Hobbesians could claim that, as it has turned out, God did make it wrong to kill an innocent person and the sovereign has not commanded us to kill an innocent person. But the voluntarist and Hobbesian views, at least as the rationalists construed them, were committed to holding that killing an innocent person could have been right, that it is only contingently true that killing an innocent person is wrong.¹⁰ According to the rationalists, however, any theory with such an implication had to be false. For it was obviously absurd to hold that mathematics was merely contingent or dependent on the arbitrary will of God or sovereign. It was obvious that mathematics was necessary, that not even God or sovereign could have made two

plus two equal five. And morality, because it was self-evident in the same way mathematics was, had to have the same modal status as mathematics. So morality had to be necessary, independent of the will of God or sovereign, as well.

When sentimentalist moral theories began to gain currency in the early part of the 18th century, the rationalists used the mathematics-morality analogy to attack them as well.¹¹ The sentimentalists held that morality originated not in reason alone but at least partly in sentiment.¹² Sentiments vary from person to person, however, as well as varying within a single person from one time to another. But morality is like mathematics in that it is uniform and constant, invariable. That two plus two equals four and that it is wrong to kill an innocent person are both “eternal and immutable” truths.¹³ They would be true and will continue to be true no matter how any of us happen to feel at any moment in time. So our sentiments — how we feel about things — cannot be the origin of mathematics or of morality, for our sentiments vary in a way that mathematics and morality do not.¹⁴ And indeed, it would be just as ridiculous to claim that you are no longer under a moral obligation because your feelings have changed as it would be to claim that a mathematical theorem has ceased to be true because you no longer feel the same way about it.

In drawing a comparison between mathematics and morality, the rationalists did not commit themselves to holding that the two subjects were exactly the same in every respect. But there is one apparent difference that they did have to address, as it bore directly on the crucial similarity on which the analogy relied. As we’ve seen, the rationalists based their comparison on the idea that mathematics and morality are both self-evident. One might object, however, that our moral thinking is characterized by

kinds of disagreement and perplexity that do not afflict the belief that two plus two equals four. Often enough, one person's judgment about what is right or wrong conflicts with another person's judgment about what is right or wrong. And in morally fraught situations one person may be uncertain about what is right and what is wrong. But we are never in disagreement or perplexity about whether two plus two equals four. So how could the rationalists maintain the mathematics-mathematics comparison in the face of these seemingly crucial disanalogies? They did so by pointing out that disagreement and perplexity do in fact afflict some mathematical propositions. No one disagrees about or is perplexed by basic arithmetic equations. But disagreement and perplexity do characterize our responses to many aspects of high-level mathematics. What, after all, is the job of a mathematician if not to try to prove or disprove theorems about which there is disagreement and perplexity? So the analogy between morality and mathematics continues to hold after all. There is no disagreement or perplexity about basic arithmetic truths, such as that two plus two equals four. But neither is there any disagreement or perplexity about basic moral truths, such as that it is wrong to kill an innocent person with any reason or provocation at all. There is disagreement and perplexity about what to do in complex, morally fraught situations. But there is disagreement and perplexity about sophisticated high-level mathematics as well.¹⁵

3. The sentimentalists' beauty-morality analogy

Observing something beautiful — a natural object, say, or a work of art — is inseparable from being disposed to have some positive feeling toward it. Similarly, thinking that

someone is virtuous is inseparable from being disposed to have some positive feeling toward her. This similarity is the basis of the sentimentalists' beauty-morality analogy.¹⁶

One of the most conspicuous uses to which the sentimentalists put the beauty-morality analogy was to attack the egoist theories of Hobbes, Pufendorf, Cumberland, and Mandeville. These egoist theories, at least as the sentimentalists sometimes construed them, held that all humans are always ultimately motivated by self-interest, that concern for one's own happiness is the underlying reason for everything one thinks, says, and does. So construed, these egoist theories implied both that all of our *actions* are ultimately motivated by self-interest and that all of our *value judgments* are ultimately based in self-interest. The idea that all of our actions are ultimately motivated by self-interest is probably clear enough, but the idea that all our judgments are based in self-interest might require a bit more explanation. According to this egoist view of judgment, whenever I make a positive judgment about something it is because I think that that thing has benefited or will benefit me, and whenever I make a negative judgment about something it is because I think that that thing has harmed or will harm me. This egoist view thus equates the conduct of others that I judge to be virtuous and the conduct of others that I think will promote my own interests. According to this view, everything I think, say, and do is ultimately based on my concern for my own happiness, and the activity of passing moral judgment on others is no exception.

The sentimentalists pointed out, however, that this egoist view of judgment fails miserably when applied to our judgments of beauty. The pleasure that is the basis of our judgment that an object is beautiful, the sentimentalists convincingly argued, can be and often is completely independent of any thought of the self-interested advantage we might

hope to gain from the object.¹⁷ Now the fact that our judgments of beauty are not self-interested does not on its own imply that any of our other judgments or actions are not self-interested. It's logically possible that judgments of beauty are the only human phenomena that are not ultimately best explained by self-interest. But the existence of disinterested judgments of beauty does force us to abandon the global egoistic claim that self-interest underlies everything we think, say, and do. And once we abandon that global claim and observe what people are actually like, we will see that non-egoistic accounts explain many human phenomena much better than egoist ones. Most relevantly for our purposes, we will see that our moral judgments are not based in self-interest — that our judgment that someone is virtuous, like the judgment that an object is beautiful, can be and often is independent of any thought of how the person might benefit us. I may judge, for instance, that someone who lived thousands of years ago or on the other side of the world is virtuous, or that a hero fighting for my enemies is virtuous, even if his actions greatly harm my own cause. The egoists tried to account for such seemingly disinterested judgments by citing complicated causal connections between every bit of conduct I judge to be virtuous and the promotion of my own happiness. But once we have abandoned the global claim that self-interest underlies everything we think, say, and do — a claim that attention to aesthetic judgment reveals to be untenable — we will see that non-egoistic explanations of those moral judgments are exceedingly more plausible than egoistic ones.¹⁸

In addition to using it to attack egoism, the sentimentalists also used the beauty-morality analogy to defend their position from some of the most trenchant rationalist criticisms. The rationalists argued that when we make moral judgments we do not simply

note that we happen to be a feeling a certain way but rather usually engage in a considerable amount of rational thought. Perhaps some moral judgments reflect nothing more than an immediate, unconsidered emotional response, but in many cases a worthy moral judgment is one that issues from informed, conscious reflection. According to the rationalists, however, sentimental theories cannot accommodate this central feature of moral judgment, for such theories simply equate moral judgment with a feeling.

In response, the sentimentalists did not deny that reasoning and reflection often play a crucial role in forming moral judgments nor that moral judgments formed in reasoned, reflective ways are often more worthy than unreflective ones. They contended, however, that what such reasoning and reflection does is pave the way for the experience of a sentiment — that a worthy moral judgment still involves sentiment, even if the person making the judgment has to engage in reasoning and reflection in order to attain a full and accurate perception of that to which she is sentimentally responding. And the view that moral judgments can have this structure — that they can flow from sentimental responses to objects that we gain an accurate perception of only through reasoning and reflection — should not seem incoherent or ad hoc, for judgments of beauty have exactly the same structure. It is true that some aesthetic judgments (such as that a sunset is beautiful) may not involve any reasoning or reflection, just as some moral judgments (such as that it is wrong to torture a cat for fun) are made immediately, without any reasoning or reflection. But other aesthetic judgments do involve a great deal of thinking. The beauty of some works of art one can fully appreciate only after learning about and attending closely to their details and to their overall composition and design. Some natural objects one comes to see as beautiful only after gaining awareness of their

structure and function. Similarly, we often cannot properly morally assess a person's conduct until we have ascertained and thought carefully about her situation, her motives and beliefs, and the effects of her actions. Moral and aesthetic judgments, according to the sentimentalists, are all ultimately based on sentiment. But in order to be worthy, a judgment may have to be based on a sentimental response toward an accurate perception of the object, and one may arrive at an accurate perception only through reasoning and reflection.¹⁹

We can also now see how the sentimentalists used the beauty-morality analogy to fend off the rationalist criticism that sentimentalist theories fail because they have the false implication that morality is variable. In response, the sentimentalists could acknowledge that our immediate, unreflective responses to human conduct are too variable to ground moral standards. But they could then point out that our immediate, unreflective responses to works of art are too variable to ground aesthetic standards as well. That does not show, however, that sentiment is not essential to judgments of beauty. Sentiment remains essential to both morals and aesthetics, according to the sentimentalists, it's just that the sentiments that are essential are those experienced when one is considering the object of evaluation in an informed, reflective, and unbiased way. And the sentiment a person experiences when she considers something in an informed, reflective, unbiased way will not vary in the way the rationalist criticism implies. Informed, reflective, unbiased sentiments are insulated from the moment-to-moment vicissitudes of mood. They have a constancy, a fixity, that immediate, unreflective emotional responses lack and that qualifies them to serve as the basis of moral judgment.²⁰

One might continue to worry, however, that even after the sentimentalists have made it clear that they hold that the sentiments at the base of morality are informed, reflective and unbiased, the variability objection will still hit its mark, and that it will do so because of a problem inherent in the beauty-morality analogy. The problem is that aesthetic standards, even if they are based on informed, reflective, unbiased sentiments, are still less uniform than we think moral standards should be. For even among the most informed, reflective, and unbiased critics, aesthetic tastes vary, but basic moral principles (such as that it's right to be honest and wrong to murder innocents) are invariable. In response to this objection, the sentimentalists pointed out that there are certain aesthetic judgments that are just as well-established and widely agreed upon as we could wish any moral judgment to be. Every informed, reflective, unbiased observer agrees that Rembrandt was a great painter and that his works have more aesthetic merit than the illustrations on the covers of romance novels. Every informed, reflective, unbiased observer agrees that Mozart was a great composer and that his works have more aesthetic merit than commercial jingles. It's true that informed, reflective, unbiased critics may disagree about whether Rembrandt or van der Meer was the greater painter or whether Mozart or Beethoven was the greater composer.²¹ But that people disagree about fine-grained aesthetic evaluations does not pose any problem for the beauty-morality analogy, for informed, reflective, unbiased people disagree about fine-grained moral matters as well. Indeed, as we have seen, the rationalists themselves acknowledged that while certainty and agreement characterize basic moral principles, uncertainty and disagreement characterize our thinking about many specific complex fraught moral situations.

4. Adjudicating between the two analogies and assessing their place in contemporary debates

The mathematics-morality analogy works well for the rationalist cause, and the beauty-morality analogy works well for the sentimentalist cause. Each analogy helps clarify the position to which it is aligned, advance positive arguments for that position, and defend the position from attack. It's reasonable to hold, however, that we cannot affirm the aptness of both analogies for very long — that if we push the analogies far enough, they will inevitably come into conflict. For the two positions to which they are aligned — rationalism and sentimentalism — are, after all, ultimately incompatible.

Consider, for instance, the rationalist claim that morality is like mathematics in being necessary — that both mathematics and morality hold true on every possible world. If we accept this point of contact between morality and mathematics, it seems that we must also hold that there is a crucial disanalogy between our moral judgments and our aesthetic judgments. For our aesthetic judgments are not necessarily true. We can conceive of possible worlds on which our sensibilities or sensory apparatus are so different that what we see as beautiful on this world we will see as non-beautiful on that.

Or consider the sentimentalist claim that our moral distinctions depend on our sentiments. This claim fits well with the beauty-morality analogy because it is plausible to hold that there is a necessary connection between judging that something is beautiful and having a favorable feeling or pro-attitude toward it. But if we affirm this point of contact between moral and aesthetic distinctions, it seems that we must hold that there is

a crucial disanalogy between morality and mathematics. For the truth of “two plus two equals four” is entirely independent of our feelings.

How should we proceed in trying to adjudicate between the rationalists’ and sentimentalists’ leading analogies? One plausible response is to hold that these differences reveal the limitations of analogy in philosophical investigations. There may be disputes that analogical reasoning or arguments from analogy can decisively resolve. But in addressing the question of whether or not morality originates in reason alone, analogy may take us only so far. By attending to the leading analogies each side uses, we can gain a good sense of what is at issue in the debate between rationalists and sentimentalists and the general shape of the opposing positions. But if we want to get to the heart of the matter — if we want to determine which position can stake the best claim to being true — we may have no choice but to delve into the details of the less colorful non-analogical arguments that each side can offer.

Then again, we might find that the detailed non-analogical arguments on their own are inconclusive as well. We might find that each side has an internal coherence that makes it difficult for us to pinpoint any clearly decisive reasons for rejecting one and accepting the other. And attention to the leading analogies each side offers may then turn out to give us some traction. That is not to say that the leading analogies can take the place of or preclude the non-analogical arguments. But it may be that even after we have completed a thorough examination of the other arguments, the analogies will still have a role to play in our assessment of the overall plausibility of the two positions.

One role the two leading analogies might continue to play is as attempts to capture the phenomenology of morals. The study of the phenomenology of morals is the

study of our experience of morality, of what morality is like for us. The rationalists and sentimentalists did not explicitly mark any of their claims as being phenomenological (as distinct from being, say, metaphysical or epistemological), but I think it's pretty clear that they said things that had powerful phenomenological implications. Specifically, the rationalists' leading analogy implies that the experience of morality is very similar to the experience of mathematics — that what it is like to think that an action is morally required or forbidden is similar to what it is like to think that two plus two equal four. And the sentimentalists' leading analogy implies that the experience of morality is very similar to the experience of beauty — that what it is like to think that someone is virtuous is very similar to what it is like to think that a painting is beautiful.

Does this mean that the two leading analogies taken as claims about moral phenomenology are incompatible? Perhaps, but perhaps not. It depends on which of the following three views we opt for.

- A. The rationalists' position on the experience or what-it-is-likeness of morality is in direct conflict with the sentimentalists' position, and so at least one of them must be wrong. The experience of morality may be like the experience of mathematics, and it may be like the experience of beauty, but it cannot be like the experience of both.
- B. The experience or what-it-is-likeness of morality is different for different people. Some people (perhaps as a result of their upbringing, their religion or their theoretical commitments) experience morality as

something very akin to mathematics; the rationalists' analogy captures well the experience of such people. Other people (perhaps as a result of their having a different upbringing, a different religion, or different theoretical commitments) experience morality as something very akin to beauty; the sentimentalists' analogy captures well the experience of these other people. So both the rationalists and sentimentalists get something importantly right. Where both sides go wrong is in assuming that just because the experience of morality for some people has a certain character the experience of morality for all people has the same character.

- C. There are different aspects to morality, and the experience or what-it-is-likeness of some of those aspects differs from the experience or what-it-is-likeness of other aspects. The experience of thinking that a particular action is morally required or morally forbidden — the experience of thinking, for instance, that it is wrong to kill a person or right to repay a debt — is similar to the experience of thinking that a mathematical equation has a certain solution; the rationalists' analogy does a good job of capturing this aspect of our moral phenomenology. The experience of thinking that a person has a virtuous character — of thinking that someone is a good person — is similar to the experience of thinking that a painting is beautiful; the sentimentalists' analogy does a good job of capturing this aspect of our moral phenomenology. So both the rationalists and sentimentalists get something importantly right. Where both sides go

wrong is in assuming that the experience of one aspect of morality has to be phenomenologically the same as the experience of every other aspect of morality.

I believe [B] and [C] are both more plausible than [A]. This is because [B] and [C] imply that both the rationalists and sentimentalists got something right about our moral phenomenology, while [A] implies that either the rationalists or the sentimentalists got our (and their own) phenomenology completely wrong. And it seems more plausible to me — and more in concert with my own experience of morality — that both sides succeeded in capturing something important about our moral experience than that either side was entirely off-base. I cannot decide, however, which of [B] or [C] is the more plausible. Or perhaps the best option is some combination of [B] and [C]. Perhaps, that is, the predominant moral experiences of some people are more akin to their experience of mathematics, even if those people should also admit that their experiences of some aspects of morality are more akin to beauty; and the predominant moral experiences of other people are more akin to their experience of beauty, even if this second group should also admit that their experiences of some aspects of morality are more akin to mathematics. But determining the best account of moral phenomenology is beyond the scope of this essay. I hope, though, that we have seen enough to conclude that the rationalists' expressions of the mathematics-morality analogy and the sentimentalists' expressions of the beauty-morality analogy make rich contributions to the study of morality in general and to moral phenomenology in particular (even if the rationalists and

sentimentalists never took themselves to be engaged in an exclusively phenomenological enterprise).

Whether morality originates in sentiment or reason alone is a question — or, more accurately, a cluster of questions²² — that continues to occupy contemporary thinkers. But while the central animating ideas of the 17th and 18th century debate still exert a powerful influence on contemporary thought, rationalist and sentimentalist positions have evolved considerably in the last three hundred years.²³ Recently, for instance, some have begun to use the methods of cognitive science and experimental psychology to try to determine the extent to which sentiment plays a role when human beings form moral judgments, an undertaking that is certainly in the spirit of the work of the philosophers we have been discussing but obviously involves techniques and argument-styles that do not appear in the early modern texts.²⁴ I would not be surprised, however, if contemporary thinkers — including those using new scientific methods — end up finding that the leading analogies of the early modern British moralists continue to serve exceedingly useful functions, for it seems to me that these analogies are perennially useful points of ingress into the fundamental questions about the origins of morality.

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Notes:

¹ The claim that morality originates in reason alone is multiply ambiguous, suggesting a cluster of positions that can theoretically be separated from each other. One of these positions is metaphysical: the view that morality is constituted by reason alone. Another of these positions is epistemological: the view that we discern morality through the use of reason alone. A third of these positions is practical: the view that moral conduct is motivated by reason alone. The rationalists I discuss here held all three of these positions, and perhaps for that reason they did not always feel the need to sharply distinguish between them. But they sometimes did draw such distinctions. As Balguy put it when distinguishing the metaphysical from the epistemological strands of rationalism, “Properly speaking, it is not our *Faculty of Reason*, but *Reason objectively considered*, that is the *Foundation of Morality*. Those *Reasons and Relations of Things*, which necessarily flow from the Natures and Circumstances of Agents and Objects” (Balguy II 71). And again: “[T]he true *Foundation of Virtue* is not our *Faculty of Reason*, but the intrinsic *Reasons and Relations of Things*” (Balguy II 80). But like Cudworth and Clarke, Balguy also made the epistemological claim that it is our faculty of reason alone that enables us to perceive moral truths (see Balguy II 48, 81-82). As well, Balguy affirmed the practical version of the rationalist view (see Balguy II 55, 64, 84, 87-90).

² It is problematic, or at least oversimplified, to say that Shaftesbury was a moral sentimentalist. There were aspects of his moral philosophy that were definitely sentimentalist, but there were also aspects that were definitely rationalist. For further discussion of Shaftesbury’s combination of sentimentalism and rationalism, see Part 2 of Gill.

³ Rationalism is the view that morality originates in reason alone. Sentimentalism is the negation of the rationalist view. So to be a sentimentalist one does not have to deny that reason plays an essential role in morality. To be a sentimentalist, one has to deny only that morality originates in reason alone. A sentimentalist can hold that reason and sentiment are both essential to morality.

⁴ For further discussion of the debate between moral rationalists and moral sentimentalists, see Beiser, Darwall, Gill, Norton, and Schneewind.

⁵ Here are a couple of quotes from Clarke that are representative of the mathematics-morality analogy:

[T]is without dispute more *fit* and reasonable in itself, that I should *preserve the Life* of an innocent Man, that happens at any time to be in my Power; or deliver him from any imminent danger, tho’ I have never made any promise to do so; than that I should suffer him to perish, or *take away his Life*, without any reason or provocation at all... For a Man endued with *Reason*, to deny the Truth of these Things; is the very same thing ... as if a Man that understands *Geometry* or *Arithmetick*, should deny the most obvious and known *Proportions of Lines* or *Numbers*, and perversely contend that the *Whole* is not *equal to all its parts*, or that a *Square* is not *double to a triangle* of equal base and height. (Clarke 609)

[T]is as absurd and blame-worthy, to *mistake negligently* plain *Right* and *Wrong*, that is, to *understand*, the Proportions of things in Morality to be what they are not; or *wilfully to act contrary* to known Justice and Equity, that is, to *will* things to be what they are not and cannot be; as it would be absurd and ridiculous for a Man in Arithmetical Matters, ignorantly to believe that *Twice Two is not equal to Four*; or wilfully and obstinately to content, against his own clear Knowledge, that the *whole is not equal to all its Parts*. (Clarke 613; see also 614, 626)

Here are a couple representative quotes from Balguy:

It is morally fit that Man reverence his Maker, is a Proposition self-evident to all that rightly understand the Terms... [It is] as manifest, as the Relation of *Equality* between *twice Three and Six*. (Balguy II 45-6)

The Agreement between twice Three, and Six, does not appear to me plainer or more evident, than that between Bounty and Gratitude. (Balguy II 17)

In an epistolary exchange with Hutcheson, the moral rationalist Gilbert Burnet said, “If anyone asks why [the public good is preferable to the private good], I would answer him as I would do if he asked me why four is more than two. It is self-evident” (Burnet vs. Hutcheson 233). Or as Burnet put it in another letter to Hutcheson, “But if it be further asked why it is best that the species should be happy, I own no reason can be assigned for it, no more than a reason can be assigned why the whole is equal to all its parts, or a part is less than the whole, or things equal to the same third are equal to one another” (Burnet vs. Hutcheson 238).

The rationalists compared morality to geometrical propositions as often as they compared it to arithmetical ones. The geometry-morality analogy is especially conspicuous in Cudworth’s *Treatise on eternal and immutable morality*. The rationalists thought that geometry and arithmetic occupied the same ontological and epistemological categories, as did logic, so all the uses to which they put the mathematics-morality analogy they would (and often did) also put the geometry-morality analogy. (There is, however, some irony in the fact that the rationalists most oft-used example of a self-evident and necessarily true geometrical theorem — that the internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees — is false in non-Euclidian space.)

⁶ See Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation One.

⁷ See Cudworth 137-43.

⁸ A serious worry about the rationalists’ claim is that the moral propositions they rely on as examples are a priori and self-evident only because they are analytic, tautologous, without substance. Hutcheson raised this worry in his epistolary exchange with Burnet (Burnet vs. Hutcheson 213-4) and in his “Illustrations on the moral sense” (Hutcheson’s Essay 160, 228-230, 272-272). For further discussion of this worry, see chapter 12 of Gill.

⁹ This construal of Hobbes is almost certainly a misinterpretation. For a fuller and more accurate account of Hobbes’s views, see David Gauthier, “Hobbes: The Laws of Nature” *Pacific Philosophical Review* 2001, 82: 258-84 and Tom Sewell, “Hobbes and the Morality Beyond Justice,” *Pacific Philosophical Review* 2001, 82: 227-42. For a fuller

account of voluntarist views than I can present here, see J.B. Schneewind, “Voluntarism and the Foundations of Ethics,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 1996: 25-42.

¹⁰ As Cudworth put it, “[D]ivers modern theologers do not only seriously, but zealously, contend in like manner that there is nothing absolutely, intrinsically, and naturally good and evil, just and unjust, antecedently to any positive command or prohibition of God; but that arbitrary will and pleasure of God, by its commands and prohibitions, is the first and only rule and meaning thereof. Whence it follows unavoidably that nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so foully unjust or dishonest, but if it were supposed to be commanded by this omnipotent Deity, must needs upon that hypothesis forthwith become holy, just, and righteous” (Cudworth 14; see also 16-27). Clarke criticizes command theories (both voluntarist and Hobbesian) at Clarke 596-7, 608-10, 612- 613, 616, 626-7, 631-637. Balguy raises similar criticisms at Balguy I 7-8 and II 41-42, 51.

¹¹ Cudworth attacked the view that morality originates in sensation in Books III and IV of *Treatise on eternal and immutable morality*, which was written in the 1660s, before Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume were writing. Cudworth attributed these sensation-based moral theories to Protagoras and Hobbes.

¹² In note 1, I said that the claim that morals originate in reason alone is ambiguous between the view that morals are constituted by reason alone, the view that we discern morals through reason alone, and the view that moral conduct is motivated by reason alone. The sentimentalist claim that morality originates at least partly in sentiment is triply ambiguous in the same way; sentimentalism can, that is, be taken to be the negation of any of those three versions of the rationalist view. Hutcheson and Hume endorsed all three senses of the sentimentalist claim; that is to say, they rejected all three versions of the rationalist view. It is less clear that Shaftesbury rejected all three versions of the rationalist view; he might have held that morals originate in reason alone, even if he also believed that sentiment is implicated in our moral judgment and conduct. In what follows, I focus mainly on the question of whether we discern morality through reason alone — on whether our moral judgments are based on reason alone or at least partly on sentiment.

¹³ “Eternal and immutable” is a phrase Cudworth used for the title of his treatise on morality. Clarke used the phrase “eternal and necessary” (Clarke 608). These phrases captured well the rationalists’ view that morality is necessary and independent of the will of God or sovereign.

¹⁴ See Balguy I 7-9, 23, 25 41; II 29-30, 62-63.

¹⁵ As Balguy put it, “[W]e cannot in all Instances be absolutely secure that [our moral ideas are conformable to moral reality]. In some nicer Cases we may misapprehend the States and Circumstances of moral Agents, and the relations between them... Nevertheless, in ordinary Cases, we may securely rely on our own Perceptions, the Objects of which, even in Morals, are often self-evident Truths, and almost always resolvable into such... To give Pain, without Cause, to a sensible Creature, is an action self-evidently *wrong*, as being directly repugnant to the nature of the object, and the Circumstances of the Agent: The Iniquity of it as manifest to every Understanding, as the Difference between a curve and straight Line.” (Balguy II 34-35) See also Clarke 611-612, 617-18, and 625.

¹⁶ Here is one of the many instances in which Shaftesbury draws the beauty-morality analogy: “The case is the same in the mental or moral subjects as in the ordinary bodies or common subjects of sense. The shapes, motions, colours and proportions of these latter being presented to our eye, there necessarily results a beauty or deformity, according to the different measure, arrangement, and disposition of their several parts. So in behaviour and actions, when presented to our understanding, there must be found, of necessity, an apparent difference, according to the regularity or irregularity of the subjects. The mind, which is spectator or auditor of other minds, cannot be without its eye and ear so as to discern proportion, distinguish sound and scan each sentiment or thought which comes before it. It can let nothing escape its censure. It feels the soft and harsh, the agreeable and disagreeable in the affections, and finds a foul and fair, a harmonious and dissonant, as really and truly here as in any musical numbers or in the outward forms or representations of sensible things. Nor can it withhold its admiration and ecstasy, its aversion and scorn any more in what relates to one than to the other of these subjects... Now as in the sensible kind of objects the species of images of bodies, colours and sounds are perpetually moving before our eyes and acting on our senses, even when we sleep, so, in the moral and intellectual kind, the forms and images of things are no less active and incumbent on the mind, at all seasons, and even when the real objects themselves are absent. In these vagrant characters of pictures of manners, which the mind of necessity figures to itself and carries still about with it, the heart cannot possibly remain neutral but constantly takes part one way or the other. However false or corrupt it be within itself, it finds the difference, as to beauty and comeliness, between one heart and another, one turn of affection, one behaviour, one sentiment and another and, accordingly, in all disinterested cases, must approve in some measure of what is natural and honest and disapprove of what is dishonest and corrupt” (Shaftesbury 172-173; cf. 65, 157-8, 150, 191, 254-5, 255, 324, 327, 414-418).

Hutcheson’s first book — *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* — is a very extended instance of the beauty-morality analogy, in that it attempts to show that our ideas of beauty and virtue both have the same kind of sense-based origin. As Hutcheson puts it in his preface when explaining his goal of showing that our ideas of beauty and morality both originate in the positive feelings the perception of certain objects produce in us, “Our gentlemen of good Taste can tell us of a great many Senses, Tastes, and Relishes for Beauty, Harmony, Imitation in Painting and Poetry; and may not we find too in Mankind a Relish for Beauty in Characters, in Manners?” (Hutcheson’s Inquiry 9).

Hume compares beauty and morality in *The Standard of Taste* 227-9, in the *Enquiry concerning Morals* 173-4, and in numerous places throughout the *Treatise* (THN 2.1.8.3, 2.2.5.16, 3.3.4.3, 3.3.1.20, 3.3.1.27). As Hume puts it in typical passage from Book III of the *Treatise*, “Our sense of beauty depends very much on [the principle of sympathy] and where any object has a tendency to produce pleasure in its possessor, it is always regarded as beautiful; as every object, that has a tendency to produce pain, is disagreeable and deform’d... The same principle produces, in many instances, our sentiments of morals, as well as those of beauty” (THN 3.3.1.8-9). Also noteworthy are sections 7 and 8 of Book II, Part I of the *Treatise*. Section 7 is “Of vice and virtue” and

section 8 is “Of beauty and deformity,” and Hume makes very similar claims about both topics.

Although Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume all held that the experiences of beauty and morality were the same in that both essentially involved a positive feeling, the three of them differed on other important issues. Hutcheson argued that our perceptions of beauty are based on an aesthetic sense while our perceptions of morality are based on a moral sense; each of these senses, for Hutcheson, is internal and non-egoistic, but each is also an original faculty and distinct from any other sense. Hume did not countenance Hutcheson’s multiple original internal senses; Hume argued that the non-egoistic types of pleasures in which virtue and beauty originate are both caused by the operation of sympathy. It is unclear whether Shaftesbury believed that human nature included the distinct kinds of original, internal senses that Hutcheson proposed and Hume eschewed. But it is clear that Shaftesbury believed that we perceive morality and beauty through natural, innate, or instinct features of our constitution. Shaftesbury differs from both Hutcheson and Hume in sometimes holding not merely that morality is crucially similar to beauty but that morality is the same thing as, or a subset of, beauty (Shaftesbury 254-5, 257, 320, 327). Shaftesbury also differs from Hutcheson and Hume in sometimes advancing a rationalist view of beauty (Shaftesbury 150, 331).

¹⁷ See Shaftesbury 318-19, Hutcheson’s *Inquiry* 25-26, Hutcheson’s *Essay* 74 and THN 2.2.5.16 and 3.3.1.20.

¹⁸ Hutcheson’s *Inquiry* is one of the fullest attacks on egoism in the English language. Shaftesbury attacks egoism throughout the *Characteristics* (see Shaftesbury 46, 55-56, 127, 266).

¹⁹ As Hume writes, “[I]n order to pave the way for [the moral] sentiment, and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant analogies formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained. Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance, command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence, or adapt them better to our taste and sentiment. But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection. There are just grounds to conclude, that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species, and demands assistance of our intellectual faculties in order to give it a suitable influence on the human mind” (*Enquiries* 173; cf. THN 3.3.1.27 and *The Standard of Taste*.) Or as one of Shaftesbury’s characters in *The Moralists* puts it, “What difficulty to be in any degree knowing! How long before a true taste is gain! How many things shocking, how many offensive at first, which afterwards are known and acknowledged the highest beauties! For it is not instantly we acquire the sense by which these beauties are discoverable. Labour and pains are required and time to cultivate a natural genius ever so apt or forward?” (Shaftesbury 320; see also Shaftesbury 105-6).

²⁰ Shaftesbury says that in order to develop a proper and durable taste I must “*learn* to fancy, to admire, to please, as the subjects themselves are deserving and can bear me out. Otherwise, I like at this hour but dislike the next” (Shaftesbury 151). Hume says that the

true standard of taste is based on a “durable admiration” that issues from a “serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object” (Standard of Taste 232-233).

²¹ Hume writes, “But though this axiom [that it is fruitless to dispute concerning tastes], by passing into a proverb, seems to have attained the sanction of common sense; there is certainly a species of common sense which opposes it, at least serves to modify and restrain it. Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as TENERIFFE, or a pond as extensive as the ocean” (Standard of Taste 230-231).

²² See notes 1 and 12.

²³ Excellent recent work on this issue (and work that is deeply informed by the 17th and 18th century debates) can be found in Blackburn, Korsgaard, and Smith.

²⁴ See Blair, Greene et. al., and Nichols.